

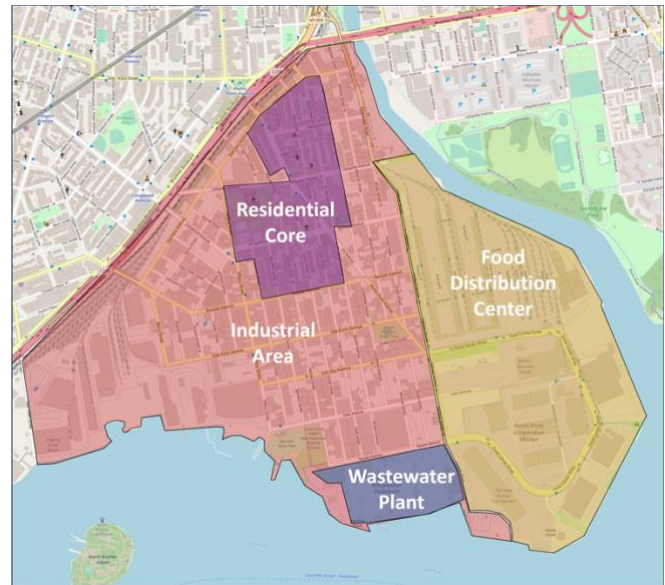
THE BRONX IS BREATHING: REIMAGINING A CLEANER HUNTS POINT

The Hunts Point neighborhood in the South Bronx is home to 13,000 residents, 40% of whom live below the poverty line and where asthma rates among youth are 2.5 times higher than the New York City average. The neighborhood is also home to nine waste-transfer facilities, numerous recycling yards, a wastewater treatment plant, and the nation's largest wholesale food hub, which together contribute to 15,000 truck trips through the neighborhood each day, generating high levels of ozone, particulate matter, and nitrogen oxides. The Bronx Is Breathing: Reimagining a Cleaner Hunts Point project—as conceptualized by Volvo Technology of America and their team members Urban Health Plan, the Greater Hunts Point Economic Development Corporation, and the Point Community Development Corporation—aims to address these issues by developing financially and technologically feasible approaches to electrify heavy-duty fleets (including refrigeration trucks) serving the region. Additionally, the charging infrastructure needed for the transition will be multi-purpose and open to the public.

The project's overall objectives are to lower the financial and technical barriers to electric vehicle (EV) adoption and improve access to electric freight vehicles to improve air quality and reduce greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions in the Hunts Point neighborhood. To achieve this goal, the project team will develop a multi-use EV charging hub that includes charging access for light-, medium-, and heavy-duty vehicles in addition to other electric modes, such as bikes and scooters; create a worker-owned, Electric Truckers Cooperative (ETC); and partner with a local food rescue organization, City Harvest, to deploy electric transport refrigeration units (eTRUs) and charge them at the hub. Another non-governmental organization (NGO) partner, Empire Clean Cities, is responsible for monitoring impacts and modeling the emissions reductions achieved by an electric refrigerated fleet.

The project's equity objectives are:

- Reverse negative environmental impacts—poor air quality and elevated health risks—suffered by the community due to decades of highly polluting truck traffic through the neighborhood and inequitable investment and development; and



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- Ensure that community members are prepared to take leading roles in the clean transportation economy through numerous education and job training opportunities.

PROGRAM DESIGN

While projects to improve air quality in Hunts Point have been funded by multiple sources, this case study focuses on the project funded by the New York State Energy Research and Development Authority (NYSERDA) through its Clean Transportation Prizes program. NYSERDA awarded the Bronx Is Breathing project \$10 million over three years under its Clean Neighborhoods Challenge. This component of the NYSERDA program is unique in that each project must demonstrate emissions reductions in disadvantaged communities and develop robust community engagement strategies to ensure that all voices are heard throughout the design and construction process.

¹ Map adapted from *Hunts Point Forward: A Vision for the Future, Final Report, June 2022*, available at <https://edc.nyc/sites/default/files/2023-09/Hunts-Point-Forward-Vision-Plan-Web-English.pdf#page=21>, accessed Sept. 21, 2023.

To achieve both the emissions reduction and community engagement goals laid out by NYSERDA, the project proposal process was broken into two phases—planning grant and final proposal—with increased funding available after the planning-grant phase to conduct additional community outreach and further develop proposal ideas considering community feedback. Finalists to the competition were required to submit a detailed community engagement plan—developed with help from local community partners and NYSERDA’s community outreach consultants—to ensure that community members and local organizations have ongoing opportunities to participate in and influence project decisions. For the grand prize winners, these plans are to be updated semi-annually to incorporate community feedback received and address any changing conditions that may affect the project and community.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY

The Bronx Is Breathing project team consists of ten partners, five of which are local organizations based in the Bronx with strong community ties. Community engagement began before the project proposal was written. Information gained from 13 interviews with community leaders helped shape the project team’s planning grant proposal. These early pre-proposal conversations led to identifying the future site of the multi-user charging hub and the importance of addressing economic development needs in addition to pollution mitigation.

During the planning grant phase, the project team sought to reach populations that do not often show up at community events, such as working parents, seniors, truck drivers, and the companies (trucking companies, food companies, distributors) that would use the infrastructure, electric vehicles, and facilities in Hunts Point. Community events were organized at lunch/dinner times to bring various stakeholders together in a neutral location to provide proposal input. Childcare was provided to enable family involvement. During this outreach phase, the focus on economic opportunity and workforce development was strengthened, and the financial constraints for companies interested in fleet electrification were brought into focus. All of these perspectives were then integrated into the final proposal to ensure project equity across diverse stakeholders. This multi-phased, community-centric approach ultimately led to the \$10 million NYSERDA award, and a project backed by community stakeholders.

Informed by outreach activities during the pre-proposal and planning grant phases, the Bronx Is Breathing project team will take a multi-pronged approach to community engagement during project implementation to provide numerous ways for the community to interact, inform, and ultimately influence the project in ways that maximize community benefits across all populations. To boost community participation, the team will use the following



A work-group session for the Bronx Is Breathing project meets as part of the Annual Town Hall at Hunt’s Point Community Center. (Courtesy of NYSERDA.)

seven approaches to gather input regarding site design, workforce development, and EV education:

- **Project kickoff meeting and workshop:** Introduce project and host a 1-hour workshop to gather community feedback about the project, engagement approach, economic benefits, and hub site design. Launch website that includes project information, calendar of events, feedback portal, and contact information.
- **Steering committee formation:** Form a steering committee—composed of Bronx-based advocates, community-based organizations (CBOs), the community board, business owners, elected officials, workers, and residents—to reach a broader base of constituents. The committee will meet quarterly, track participation, and develop methods to hear from the hardest-to-reach populations.
- **Space-planning workshops:** Hold several workshops to ensure that the multi-user charging hub design is informed by community feedback. Goals include site planning, space allocations, and adjacent amenity spaces.
- **Community benefits agreement and vendor recruitment strategy:** Use feedback from different community forums to learn about desired economic and social benefits and create a contract with community members to bind project objectives.
- **Wayfinding:** Create billboards, signage, and community art to direct residents and workers to the multi-user charging hub.
- **General outreach:** Use different methods—such as bike tours, canvassing, and tables at events—to reach people where they are to gather project feedback and provide education related to EVs, Environmental Justice, and air quality.
- **Education, job training, and learning panels:** Provide numerous opportunities for residents and workers to learn about EVs, develop skills to participate in and be leaders of the clean energy transition, and acquire Commercial Driver License (CDL) certification (four classes offered

per year). Settings will consist of lunch and learns, learning panels, EV technical trainings, and ride and drives.

In all cases, participation will be tracked by collecting information from all participants, such as name, zip code, and organization. The data will then be analyzed to assess participation gaps, refine outreach approaches, and engage with under-represented stakeholders.

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

Initial community outreach efforts (during pre-proposal and planning-grant phases) yielded several important findings. First, from the community perspective, economic opportunity was critical, a common concern for many disadvantaged communities. The EV transition provides new employment opportunities for populations with the appropriate training. Therefore, the integration of workforce development and job training not only bolstered community support but will also bring sustainable and equitable outcomes through longer-term economic stability.

Next, from the industry perspective, many barriers remain in the transition to electric fleets, especially for medium- and heavy-duty vehicles. Early in the outreach process, the team identified the following freight-electrification challenges that could derail the project without new business strategies or approaches:

1. Limitations imposed by leased real estate that Hunts Point fleets occupy.
2. Lack of technologies available for refrigerated fleet vehicles.
3. Prohibitively high costs to acquire electric medium- and heavy-duty vehicles.

First, helping to ensure realistic expectations for all parties—residents, drivers, and fleets—is critical. For example, it is important to be clear on timelines and how long it will take for community benefits, such as the multi-use EV charging hub, to materialize. For a project of this size, complexity, and duration, some of the early community impacts will lead to street disruptions due to infrastructure improvements and hub construction. By identifying these potential flashpoints with the community early and often, and addressing them in a community engagement plan, the team can be ready to share the appropriate information at the right time and head off, or reduce, complaints about construction noise and temporary closures. The Bronx Is Breathing project incorporates a series of public forums to make sure the project team keeps on top of community concerns.

Next, understanding project constraints from all perspectives early in the design process will help promote holistic and novel solutions that ensure positive outcomes for all stakeholders. Finally, and more generally, the flexibility to change course and iterate based on community feedback and new information is extremely important and should be

built into each project task to ensure overall success. While the Bronx Is Breathing project is still in its infancy, several years of outreach and community engagement have informed a project designed to meet diverse community-level needs while also tackling national-scale emissions reduction goals.

EARLY OBSERVATIONS

From the program level, while the project is just beginning for NYSERDA's ten grand prize winners, some challenges emerged during the initial phases of several projects, including for the Bronx Is Breathing team. For example, to emphasize the importance of community input to proposals, NYSERDA provided finalists up to \$50,000 in funding to compensate local community partners for participating in proposal improvement. However, due to time limitations in identifying partners, defining their roles, clarifying the type of support that could be provided, and a lack of capacity of the non-profit partners to interpret subcontracts or adhere to invoicing requirements, much of this money went unspent. For the VOLVO team, the main issues in using these funds included contracting challenges and the inability to provide advance payment, making it difficult for small, cash-constrained CBOs.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND LESSONS LEARNED

For program designers

- A multi-phased approach allows for community members and other partners to influence the proposal and project design in ways that maximize benefits across diverse stakeholder groups. For the Bronx Is Breathing project, the team sought input at the earliest stages of proposal development. Because workforce development and opportunities to obtain a CDL were extremely important to residents, these goals were integrated into the final project proposal.
- Provide funds, coaching, and training opportunities upfront for small CBOs to understand grant proposal requirements, hire additional staff, and be better prepared to interpret and comply with invoicing and contracting requirements. Many CBOs do not have experience, cash, staff, bandwidth, or program management expertise to take full advantage of outreach and engagement funding under a constrained timeline. Many advocacy groups, for example, use a lot of volunteer labor or do not operate with hourly rate schedules, and so they did not have an easy way to comply with invoicing requirements that are standard practice for private firms.

For project teams

- Provide numerous ways for community members to participate and engage beyond education and surveys. Community members should feel that they are truly contributing to the design process. In the case of Hunts

Point, workshops enabled community members to help co-design the charging hub. Additionally, the team developed a community benefits contract to ensure that both developers and community members were unified on project objectives and outcomes.

- To build trust in the community where the project is proposed to take place, get out and walk the neighborhood, do on-the-ground reconnaissance, and find out where and when community members already gather. The Bronx Is Breathing project was one agenda item at a regularly scheduled community event sponsored by a local action agency, The Point, which residents were used to attending. The project team piggybacked onto the meeting with a series of breakout sessions to gather input on specific aspects of the project. Overall, the meeting was attended by over 60 individuals, most of whom participated in the discussions.
- In the pre-proposal phase, understand the community's needs and desires before proposing a solution. Community co-designed projects lead to increased community satisfaction, better utilization, and longer-term outcomes.
- Setting expectations with the community regarding timelines and anticipated temporary disturbances due to construction will enable the community to feel prepared for the changes that are happening, make alternative arrangements where necessary, and limit negative feedback during those periods.

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